



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2020

Reframing film festivals – histories, economies, cultures

Walde, Laura

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-199854>
Conference or Workshop Item
Published Version

Originally published at:

Walde, Laura (2020). Reframing film festivals – histories, economies, cultures. In: International Film Studies Conference at Ca'Foscari University, Venice, 11 February 2020 - 12 February 2020, Consulta Universitaria del Cinema.

The Film Festival as a Cultural Format

For its 76th edition in 2019, the *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia* reported an audience attendance of 105,000 visitors. If we include all of the sections, the audience could choose between a staggering number of 143 films – I counted them! – to watch in the span of 11 days. Roughly one month before Venice, the *Muestra de Cine de Ascaso* takes place in a tiny village in the Spanish Pyrenees, with a population of 7 people who live in 6 houses, and with the village open air theatre sporting a capacity of 170 seats in total. It was founded in 2011 and its organizers proudly call it the “smallest film festival in the world”. They show 12 films in 5 days and host talks with some of the directors. There are no awards, but the organizers pay a screening fee of 50 Euros for each film shown in the program. We call both the *Mostra* in Venice as well as the *Muestra* in Ascaso “film festivals.” Significant differences or even contradictions regarding size, location, outreach, various cultural aspects, value formation, exhibition practices, ideological and political directions are homogenized under an umbrella term of “the festival format,” which as a whole only refers to any form of organized public film screenings showing a selection of films within a specific timeframe. My claim for this presentation is that following recent proposals in film and media studies as well as art history, a more comprehensive notion of the term “format” can become a relevant level of analysis with regard to film festivals, too, but it needs much further theoretical and methodological cultivation if it should remain meaningful as a technical term.

While the public display of films is the sole connecting factor between two events such as Venice and Ascaso, both critics as well as film and media scholars refer to the film festival as a “format” in the generalized sense that television studies have come to define it in the 1980s with reference to the market-oriented, commercial design of a program that targets specific audiences. Formats are, as Denis McQuail expressed it, “a mechanism for ordering the relations between producers and consumers.” (McQuail 2005: 370) Formats can thus be said to create the conditions for establishing program structures that an audience can anticipate. In the case of film festivals: Singular public screenings of films that were selected by a particular group of people according to a some more or less concisely formulated mission statement. The concepts underlying the term “format” belong to a comprehensive family of theories which, although originating from different academic traditions, are intended to fulfil the same basic analytical function: Their purpose is to bring order to a variety of communicative manifestations and to explain social coordination. Formats are “a creature of policy as well as technology, economy, and culture”, to use the words of Jonathan Sterne, one of the more well-known proponents of format studies. Format studies have become prevalent because the concept of the format encourages us to find answers to questions which cannot be solved at the level of the wider and more abstract notion of the “medium”. I quote Haidee Wasson from her article “Formatting Film Studies”: “The idea of a format (and its benefit to film and media studies) is that it allows a more precise analytic instrument than the concept of an ahistorical, unchanging, and thus rather expansive, concept of a medium.” (58-29). A more comprehensive approach to the concept of format therefore not only includes technical preconditions, but encompasses aspects of form, function and content in equal measure. Such an approach locates the format at an intermediate level between the macrostructures of a medium and the microstructures of specific media contributions, giving us an insight into the cultural, social, technical and political dynamics of a given artefact or event.

As mentioned before, there are various conceptions of formats coming from different fields of study. For the analysis of the processes involved in a film festival and its place in the world, I would like to suggest that for a theory of the film festival as a format, the concepts developed

by David Joselit in *After Art* (2013) and, tangentially, by David Summers in *World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2003) are a stimulating point of departure, albeit not yet a fully thought-out theoretical approach. An art historian by profession, Joselit has just recently taken up a position as professor in the department of Art, Film and Visual Studies at the University of Harvard. In his research, Joselit has always been less interested in the production of images than in what comes "after," namely the conditions and effects of their circulation in heterogeneous networks – hence the title of his 2013 publication, *After Art*. His concept of format is supported by metaphors from the field of digital circulation – he speaks of *links*, *connections*, *network* etc. The Internet, or more precisely the Web 2.0.

and the explosive increase in the number of images and their distribution, serves Joselit as a figure of thought. The links or connections between images, spaces, events, people, institutions, and so on, establish a network regulating rights to action or rights to representation. Joselit writes:

The patterns of connection such rights configure – their constellation of links – are what I call formats. Simply put a format is a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content. Mediums are subsets of formats – the difference lies solely in scale and flexibility. Mediums are limited and limiting because they call forth singular objects and limited visual practices, such as painting or video. [...] Formats regulate image currencies (image power) by modulating their force, speed, and clarity. (2013: 52-53)

His arguments are decidedly indebted to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, but what renders Joselit's theorization on cultural formats productive for the study of film festivals is, on the one hand, his insistence that formats are scalable – they can cover the intimate encounter between a work of art and an individual to the global mass circulation of images – and, on the other hand, that formats have a political dimension inasmuch as they become effective or potent in the world. In this regard, Joselit uses the term *currency*, which is established in a system governed by dynamics of exchange and the hierarchical determination of value relations. Hence the format of a work of art does not result in reification, but rather consists in the way in which a work of art stands in the world. Formats therefore point to the relations of power and dependence in which a given cultural formation is situated. The negotiation of relations is also decisive in David Summers' concept of format. In *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (2003), a work of monumental proportions which aims to introduce new methodological approaches for the negotiation of Western art history in relation to universal artistic production, the art historian introduced the format as a concept to discuss the culturally and contextually specific conditions that mediate between virtual worlds and actual, real spaces: "The encounter of an observer with a virtual space [...] takes place before a culturally specific format – a screen, a polyptych or book, for example – in personal and social space." (44) Even though Summers refers to the material shape of an artwork in this quote, he goes on to analyze the format of a specific canvas regarding the conditions that regulate the work's reception, its status and its circulation. Summers, then, thinks of the format as encompassing all culturally specific conditions of presentation that mediate between artworks and real spaces, and Joselit follows a similar train of thought when he classifies the "links" in a network of connections into various types of contact on different levels of scale: work to citizen, community to institution, institution to state, state to globe (Joselit 2012: 59). These four types of links are the basic units for currencies of image power and, with regard to the various and diverse formats of film festivals, can help us delineate the dynamics of the production and exchange of cultural, social and political value and dominance at play within these institutions. I would like to run

through these four types of links and for each suggest some thoughts on how the analysis of these links could become relevant in the context of film festivals.

Work to Citizen

On the smallest scale, Joselit proposes to consider the exchange that exists not between the artwork and a subjective response by an individual, but between the artwork and the “citizen” as a “responsible member of a community” (61). What he essentially refers to are relations of responsibility that can be casual, highly standardized, ignored or abused. When Lars von Trier announced at the Cannes premiere of *MELANCHOLIA* in 2011 that he is a Nazi and understands Hitler, the organizers later issued an apology underlining that they would never permit such statements within the public forum that is their festival. Without assuming to know Mr. von Trier’s motivations, it is nevertheless interesting how his comment and the subsequent apology unmasked the presumably liberal festival organization’s implicit presumptions regarding fundamental political positions of the directors whose works they show in competition. By refusing to reconfirm these assumptions, von Trier painfully confronted a festival community with their indiscriminate expectations in a filmmaker’s “correct” political attitude and his self-discipline when it comes to manipulating audiences with statements that cannot be definitively classified as being serious or a really bad joke.

Community to Institution

For the second register of relations, Joselit asks us to consider “a class of people (which may or may not share an official class designation such as, for example, the proletariat) and an institution” (2013: 72). Taking the example of the institution “museum,” Joselit concludes that the format which the relation between community and institution takes is based on the contradiction between accumulation of wealth and democracy. In the case of film festivals, the matter of selection and presentation – issues of programming and curating – could be analyzed on the level of community to institution. A pertinent example is the current debate on gender parity in the festival circuit, where the presumed political convictions of the people deciding what films run in competition are not reflected in the number of works coming from directors of diverse backgrounds regarding gender, class and ethnicity. The right to participation for disabled or socially, economically or politically disadvantaged people comes to mind, too, as well as the analysis of educational programs for children and young audiences, which have become a major element in the schedule of many film festivals not least because outreach programs are currently relatively easy to finance with public money, at least with regard to European countries.

Institution to State

On the third level of institution to state, institutions such as museums or film festivals assume an important role with regard to state diplomacy as well as location development. “In postindustrial ‘experience economies’ whose growth is characterized by services ranging from tourism to finance, the branding of museums and other cultural facilities is a valuable – even essential – asset for municipalities, regions, and nations.” writes Joselit (2013: 76-77). There exists a number of studies on film festivals that explore the positive dynamics between cultural agendas and city marketing. A festival’s role in establishing alternative public spheres for representation in countries marked by dictatorship or processes of political and cultural decolonialization would fall in this category of relations, too. The format of the recently shut-down China Independent Festival could be analyzed from the perspective of this level, I would argue.

State to Globe

Finally, on the largest scale of connections to be analyzed is the link between state and globe. Marijke de Valck noted 13 years ago in *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* that “Western festivals continue to be the most important gateways for the cultural legitimization of world cinema; Western funding has a disproportionate influence on international co-productions; and the primacy of Western taste results in the ‘ghettoization’ of cinemas from developing countries in the less prestigious program sections of the various festivals.” (2007: 215) The situation might have evolved quite a bit since 2007, but the film festival as a cultural format that was essentially invented and is still largely dominated by professionals and audiences from the Global North is still an example of how art has a diplomatic portfolio, regulating representation of cultural difference by both denying and opening up new public spheres for exhibition.

Format studies have gained in prevalence throughout various sectors of film and media studies as a new methodological and critical approach within the past few years, but by way of conclusion, my presentation attempted to very briefly demonstrate that the term “format” still requires further theoretical and methodological cultivation. Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that given the paradigmatic shifts in film exhibition and reception over the past 20 years, this “should be engendering new terms, and new kinds of analysis, evaluation, and measurement, not to mention new kinds of political and social formations, [...]. We’re stuck with vocabularies and patterns of thinking that are still tied to the ways we were watching movies half a century ago” (2012: 38). Taking Rosenbaum’s statement to heart, I would argue that a more careful understanding and conceptualization of the various applications of the term “format” and the discourses associated with it, with all its virtues but also its limitations, could offer us an insight into the mechanisms at work in such a complex and diverse cultural formation that we commonly refer to simply as “the film festival.”

Bibliography

- De Valck, Marijke. *Film Festivals. From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.
- Joselit, David. "Against Representation. In Conversation with David Andrew Tasman." In: *Dis Magazine*, 2015. <http://dismagazine.com/blog/75654/david-joselit-against-representation/>
- Joselit, David. *After Art*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- McQuail, Denis (1983). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd. Fifth Edition, 2005.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "End or Beginning: The New Cinephilia". In: Koch, Gertrud; Pantenburg, Volker; Rothöhler, Simon (eds.): *Screen Dynamics. Mapping the Borders of Cinema*. Wien: Österreichisches Filmmuseum. SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012, p. 30–41.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *MP3. The Meaning of a Format*. Durham [etc.]: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Summers, David. *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London: Phaidon Press, 2003.
- Wasson, Haidee. "Formatting Film Studies". *Film Studies, Issue 12*, 2015, p. 57–61.